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page 3

Contaminant found in wells in field lab area

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SIMI VALLEY — A potentially toxic contaminant used in the production of solid rocket fuel has been discovered in the groundwater at Rocketdyne's Santa Susana Field Laboratory, officials said Tuesday. State officials are continuing to monitor 38 wells at the hilltop facility for ammonium perchlorate, a chemical compound that can impair thyroid function. It was first detected at the field lab in August 1997, after state officials lowered the threshold for testing the substance.

"It's become somewhat of a hot issue. This contaminant is new enough that our guidelines for a cleanup schedule are a little sketchy," said Tom Kelly, an Environmental Protection Agency manager involved in cleanup of the field lab.

"We're still looking at what the toxicity of this contaminant is," he said.

Kelly said the perchlorate detection limits were lowered last year from about 400 parts per billion to 4 parts per billion after the state Department of Health Services refined its testing methods.

Rocketdyne subsequently was ordered to test for the chemical, and its groundwater report for July through September shows that four of 38 wells had traces of ammonium perchlorate, while two others had levels of 95 and 620 parts per billion.

Rocketdyne spokesman Dan Beck said the tests show that the chemical had not migrated beyond the area where solid-rocket fuel was tested and produced.

"All those wells were in areas that were close to propellant-handling areas," he said. "The sampling determined that it was localized and limited in extent and nothing had spread off the site."

He said the groundwater report for the last quarter of 1997 will not be disclosed until later this month. Information will also be provided at a March 4 meeting of the Santa Susana Workgroup, scheduled for 7 p.m. at the Simi Valley Senior Center, 3900 Avenida Simi.

The workgroup is a consortium of officials and residents monitoring the cleanup of the field lab, where decades of radioactive experiments were conducted.

Last year, a University of California, Los Angeles, study of 4,600 Rocketdyne workers found higher-than-expected death rates from a wide variety of cancers, including leukemia and lung cancer.

The first half of the study dealt with radiation exposure at the 2,600-acre field lab; a second part dealing with chemical contamination will be released later this year. Beck said Rocketdyne is continuing to monitor for ammonium perchlorate because the various state agencies have not yet determined how best to handle that type of contamination. Treatment methods will be determined in late fall or early winter, he said.

Ron Baker, a spokesman for the state Department of Toxic Substance Control, which asked Rocketdyne to test for ammonium perchlorate, said there is no danger to local drinking water.

"We haven't heard of any drinking water wells that have been shut down or are in danger of being shut down," he said. "The tests show we are aware that the material is out there. But we cannot base future activities on just one set of groundwater monitoring data. We'll be collecting additional data from those wells to see if the levels fluctuate."

Penny Nakashima, a state hazardous substance scientist, said Rocketdyne was asked to test for ammonium perchlorate after the chemical was discovered last year at Whittaker Corp.'s defunct Bermet munitions plant in Saugus.

Steve Book, a toxicologist with the Department of Health Services' drinking water program, said ammonium perchlorate used to be used to treat overactive thyroid conditions.

"(It) interferes with the thyroid gland's ability to take up iodine, which is needed to manufacture hormones needed for normal metabolism," he said. "The chemical used to be used in medicine because it would interfere with an overactive thyroid."